

GRAFFITI, ART, AND IDENTITY: EXPLORING  
GAJIN FUJITA'S *HOOD RATS*

by

Patricia Kathleen Guiley

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## **STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL**

The thesis of **Patricia Kathleen Guiley**  
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

**Winston Kyan** , Chair **10/13/2014**  
Date Approved

**Paul Monty Paret** , Member **10/13/2014**  
Date Approved

**Wesley Sasaki-Uemura** , Member **10/13/2016**  
Date Approved

and by **Brian Snapp** , Chair/Dean of  
the Department/College/School of **Art History**

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

While contemporary historians have explored the advent of graffiti as well as its link to the social and financial world, little attention has been given to overarching lenses that attempt to encompass the new global contemporary form of graffiti. In a recent catalogue of street art, Carlo McCormick argues that many of the fundamental motives and aesthetics of graffiti have transformed, requiring new lenses of analysis when comprehending the work. One of the main outcomes in the art-world system of the global contemporary is the dissolving of geographical distances that once divided art worlds from each other. As a result of evolving cultural paradigms, new parameters are required when analyzing contemporary art. It is here, in the global contemporary climate, that Gajin Fujita's *Hood Rats* shows how representations of American identity have transformed. With a composition of various cultures, Fujita's work offers a unique synergy of contemporary American identity. My study proposes a theoretical framework in which cultural exchange, and the identities expressed within that exchange, can be examined.

Dedicated to Dathan and all the rest of the Dathans,  
Patricias, and Patricks we created;  
my lifelong crew.

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## INTRODUCTION

Gajin Fujita is a Japanese-American graffiti artist, born and raised in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles, California. Throughout much of Fujita's work, there is a persistent stream of visual culture, reflecting discordant factors in Fujita's life and upbringing. Despite coming from a neighborhood whose local high school, Roosevelt High, has a dropout rate of roughly sixty percent, Fujita went on to obtain a Master of Fine Art's degree from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.<sup>1</sup> Fujita is a member of graffiti writing crews as well as being represented by one of Los Angeles's most prestigious art galleries, the LA Louver gallery. Fujita's artworks, like his upbringing, are concoctions of a variety of cultures and social paradigms.

Visually contrasting themes are particularly evident in Fujita's work *Hood Rats* (2012), in which the viewer finds a comingling of multicultural symbols and images (Figure 1). By combining various cultural symbols and art genres, the work communicates deep issues of mixed cultural identities and a collage of artistic mediums; *Hood Rats* shows how representations of American identity have morphed and changed. Just as America's disparate population has changed with intersections between multiple groups, so too has the country's art scene been transformed with the advent and growth of 20<sup>th</sup> - and 21<sup>st</sup> - century graffiti art. With a composition of various cultures, art that is

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<sup>1</sup> Fujita obtained his MFA in 2001 with his graduating art show curated by advisor Dave Hickey.



based on or includes graffiti work offers a unique synergy of contemporary American identity. More specifically, Fujita's work relates aspects of this contemporary synergy with cultural expressions within the art world by contrasting concepts of transience vs. permanence and anonymity vs. authorship. I will explain how these concepts and pairing operate within *Hood Rats*, ultimately showing that the work reflects contemporary cultural identity.

This thesis is based on several fundamental questions raised by analyzing *Hood Rats*. What do the genres of graffiti and Ukiyo-e art depicted in Fujita's work share? Do the populations that they represent share similar qualities? And, is Fujita's work a collage of cultures and artistic genres or is his art a new and separate category? With symbols and scripts ranging from contemporary graffiti tags to traditional Japanese woodblock print-like images, Fujita's multilayered work maintains visual and symbolic references to identity. By analyzing the work on two specific spectrums: that of transience and permanence on the one hand, and that of authorship and anonymity on the other, we can better understand Fujita's nuanced construction of a contemporary American identity. In addition to exploring aspects of cultural identity, these two oppositions will also aid in examining how a new dialogue is formed between contemporary graffiti art and traditional Japanese art such as ukiyo-e. Understanding connections between the various artistic genres in *Hood Rats* requires a grasp of specific artistic traditions and identities, which will be explored as the formal analysis is unpacked.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While there are undoubtedly many more conversations available to the symbolism within *Hood Rats* such as Western contemporary feminism issues as compared with female identity in Japanese history, as well as the issue of place and space when looking at sanctioned vs. nonsanctioned graffiti art, my scope is limited to questions of cultural identity in Fujita's work.

## Visual Layers

*Hood Rats* unconventionally juxtaposes divergent artistic forms and iconographies that require the viewer to question various cultures depicted in Fujita's work. Comprised of six wood panels that span 72 X 120 inches and are mounted to a wall; the scale and parameters of these panels are not unlike traditional byōbu screens.<sup>3</sup> Aiding in the interpretation of the screens, the work's backdrop is divided into quadrants of thick black lines sectioning off both the scene's background and floor. The interpretation of the black lines against the wall referencing byōbu screens is further aided by the floor lines, which create sections akin to tatami mats and serve as similar Japanese cultural cues as the screens. With the work and its subjects maintaining near life-like scale, *Hood Rats* engulfs the viewer in a theatrical experience.

Through a collage of materials and media, *Hood Rats* is created with the use of spray paint, paint markers, Mean Streak marker, and gold leaf.<sup>4</sup> Against the screen's backdrop are various graffiti symbols and signs representing location, writing crew/gang affiliation, and individual signature/tag, which are common among most graffiti works produced by crews as well as single individuals in nonsanctioned graffiti work.<sup>5</sup> The abundance of tags filling *Hood Rats*' backdrop serves as a roadmap to Fujita's writing crew and the artists' neighborhood/geography with which they affiliate themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Byōbu (屏風) are Japanese folding screens made from several joined panels. These screens were frequently used to separate interiors and enclose private spaces, among other uses. These screens are designed to redefine spaces within a room, namely to serve as doors and visual barriers.

<sup>4</sup> The Mean Streak is a type of marker made by Sanford, but can also refer to a variety of solidified paint marking sticks. This marker is a semisolidified stick of oil-based paint in a twist tube, which makes marks on many types of surfaces, including metal, wood, plastics, and paper, making it a popular graffiti instrument. It leaves a mark similar to a crayon or chalk. While they now come in a variety of colors, the original colors were blue, red, and yellow.

<sup>5</sup> The most common individual representation is the writer's personal tag and the first artwork a graffiti artist designs and perfects. Non-gang-related graffiti artists notoriously work and rework their signature tag over the span of their "writing" career as it leads to immediate fame and artistic notoriety for those artists with talent. "Nonsanctioned" graffiti will be used to define all graffiti that is not solicited or commissioned by the private or government owner of the surface on which the art is generated.

A final layering to Fujita's backdrop is found in the traditional cartouches and anti-forgery marks found in Japanese woodblock prints. Fujita mirrors the customary marks for a traditional Japanese woodblock print by placing a red cartouche located in the upper left corner and a black lined publisher's seal mark, called a "kakihan," in the lower right corner.<sup>6</sup> In traditional Edo period woodblock prints, the red cartouches frequently included the series' name as well as the work's title and date.<sup>7</sup> Keeping in line with the work's numerous nods to Los Angeles, the letters in Fujita's cartouche, ESLOS, is an acronym for East Side Los [Angeles]. With the combination of the acronym and the cartouche, Fujita pays homage both to his Japanese heritage and his hometown upbringing.<sup>8</sup> In the lower right corner is the oval with the artist's seal. As is common in his other works, Fujita signs his work with a reference to his first name, "Gajin," in the hiragana syllabary (がじん).<sup>9</sup>

At the center of the work, two women are engaged in a dramatic sword duel. Stenciled in a manner consistent with a traditional ukiyo-e Japanese woodblock print style, these women serve as a host not only for the work's thematic dialogue but also as a physical platform in which Fujita melds both cultures. Upon closer examination, the combatants – who can be initially observed as dressed in dark blue and pink kimonos

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<sup>6</sup> Kakihan are a 'writing seal' or distinctive character, mark, design, or flourish that was used as a substitute for an artist's signature or seal.

<sup>7</sup> While there was a vast variety of how ukiyo-e art was composed, some of what appears on the prints is standardized and decipherable. Such information may include the following: series title, subtitle, artist's signature, artist's seal, publisher's seal, censor's seal, date seal, printer's seal, carver's seal, and other inscriptions, such as poems, biographies, descriptive stories, and other various declarations or sentiments of the artist. (Brooklyn Museum accessed December 7, 2013, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/research/edo/woodblock/>.)

<sup>8</sup> In an author's interview with the artist, the precise interpretation of this acronym, as thought by Fujita, is stated to stand simply for "East Side Los Angeles"; however, the acronym is a colloquial term and developed by another branding entity within the LA community, therefore its full meaning varies from person to person.

<sup>9</sup> Dave Hickey, Franklin Sirmans, and Jason Steuber, *Zephyr: Paintings by Gajin Fujita* (Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006), 5.

accented with red strands, layers of maroon and brown obis, and gold and red obiages – reveal symbols of contemporary culture.<sup>10</sup> The woman laying down in a defensive posture has a black and blue bandanna around her right forearm intertwined with the kimono's sleeve as well as wrapped along her forehead. This bandanna is a customary sign for several different gangs located in Los Angeles, California. Conversely, the warrior standing in the strike position dons a white skull and cross bones insignia located on the back of her black kimono, indicating a rival gang to the woman positioned on the ground. The subtle intimation to contemporary gang culture concludes with the logo and bandanna, while the remaining formal characteristics of the women follow suit with the *modus operandi* of *ukiyo-e*.

In traditional Japanese Edo-period fashion, the women's hairstyle is congruent with the trend of the 1800s. Taken up in youthful "shimada" like chignons, the women's appearance conjures a traditional archetype of the Japanese woman during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Adorning both women's chignons are *kanzashi* hair sticks.<sup>12</sup> These hair accessories maintain a folkloric history in which sticks serve as a weapon in addition to decorating the hair, and add another note of battle and weaponry to Fujita's scene. A final

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<sup>10</sup> An obiage is a scarf-like piece of cloth that covers up the obimakura and keeps the upper part of the obi knot in place. It is customary for an unmarried, young woman to let her obiage show from underneath the obi in the front. A married woman will tuck it deeper in and only allow it to peek out. The obiage is traditionally used as an undergarment for kimono, so letting it show is a little provocative. For a further explanation on the variations both historically and in contemporary trends on the Obiage, see: Liza Carihfield Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993) 188-189.

<sup>11</sup> The Shimada (島田) is a women's hairstyle in Japan, similar to a bun or split chignon. Generally, the hair is gathered together at the crown of the head and a small portion of the bun is sectioned off to point outward. For an in depth history in women's hairdressing and Shimada in Japan, see Tamaki Asano's *Memories of Silk and Straw: A Self-Portrait of Small-Town Japan*, comp. Dr. Junichi Saga, trans. Gary O. Evans (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1990), 150-154.

<sup>12</sup> Kanzashi (簪) are hair ornaments used in traditional Japanese hairstyles. Some folklore insinuates that kanzashi sticks were occasionally used for defense in cases of emergency. Further, a single thin rod or stick was considered to have mystical powers that could ward off evil spirits, motivating women to wear them in their hair. Kanzashi came into wide use during the Edo period, when hairstyles became larger and more complicated, requiring use of a larger number of ornaments.

flourish completes the image of the duel: the women's bodies articulate exaggerated postures, not unlike those in a staged *kabuki* performance. In what can be viewed as a *mie* pose, the frozen and dramatized facial features and bodily gesticulations of the women form a visual "line-based" similarity to the graffiti text.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the severity of the lines used to construct the women's facial features draws a formal similarity between Japanese wood block prints and graffiti. That is, the text hovering in the background contains slants and angles mirrored in the dramatized lines of the two eyes, noses, and mouths of the women locked in battle.

Similarly, the *naginata* (薙刀) sword held by the figure on the left, as well as the *uchigatana* (打刀) wielded by the woman on the ground, mirror the sharp angles and unwavering lines maintained by the letters in "Hood Rats."<sup>14</sup> Creating both symmetry within the body of the word and a platform of visual likeness, the line in the center of the first "o" in "Hood" descends from right to left as does the sword of the woman who is standing in the strike position. Likewise, the second "o" found in "Hood" is marked with a center line that descends from left to right and is echoed by the sword of the woman who is laying on the ground. The graffiti lettering employed by Fujita is a version of a "BLOCKBUSTER" script. This script is typically described as "big, square letters, often tilted back and forth and [usually] in two colors."<sup>15</sup> The straight lines forming the outer

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<sup>13</sup> The *mie* pose (え or 得) is a powerful and emotional pose struck by an actor, who then freezes for a moment, is a distinctive element of *kabuki* performance. One of the primary purposes of this convention is to draw attention to a particularly important or powerful portion of the performance. Though translated to "strike" in English, the *mie* pose in Japanese the pose is translated closer to being "cut" by the actor. This verbal distinction forms an interesting connection to Fujita's work as his wood block print figures are obtained through meticulously cut stencils.

<sup>14</sup> Both the *naginata* (薙刀) and the *uchigatana* (打刀) are examples of the several varieties of traditionally made Japanese sword blades, originally used by the samurai class of feudal Japan, as well as by ashigaru (foot soldiers) and sōhei (warrior monks).

<sup>15</sup> Art Crimes: The Writing on the Wall, last modified 2013, <http://www.graffiti.org/>.

edges of the text allows Fujita to flip the horizontal direction of letters (notably here, the “R” in “Rats”) without losing the formal integrity of the letter. Both genres use strong lines, capitalizing on the forms such line construction creates. The drama produced with crisp linear lines used to compose the phrase “Hood Rats” mirrors that found in the drama being depicted in the weapons and facial characteristic of the two women. These formal similarities between Fujita’s traditional BLOCKBUSTER graffiti letters and ukiyo-e block print art create an experience for the viewer that is both culturally and aesthetically layered. The combatant figures are representative of ukiyo-e while the script is representative of graffiti. With the formal similarities shared by the slanted lines, Fujita creates a visual parallel between graffiti and ukiyo-e, setting a formal stage in addition to the thematic one.

In addition to formal similarities, the overt depiction and references to violence in *Hood Rats* links the two cultures. By garnishing the women’s traditional dress with symbols from contemporary street gangs, Fujita blends representations of brutality from both cultures. The work’s female combatants create a parallel between artistic depictions of a samurai duel and contemporary gang violence. The shared theme of violence across different cultural symbols (the samurai, the strike pose, and the gang symbols) encourages the viewer to consider a historical likeness between East Los Angeles and 1800s Japan.

With traditional graffiti markings punctuating the backdrop, a visual storyline is created that emphasizes cultural blending and transience. Indeed, the ephemeral aspect of transient graffiti markings, when combined with the delicate construction of the Japanese screen, ignites interpersonal dialogues about multicultural art genres and the people they

encompass. Regardless of a viewer's historical knowledge of either culture represented (Edo Japan and contemporary East LA), there is an undeniable sentiment regarding the malleability and ephemeral attributes of culture, whilst simultaneously giving testimony to the strength of such concepts. *Hood Rats* not only argues that culture is not pure and definable, but that the definitions used to narrate culture are as diverse as the people representing it. In the following section, I review previous scholarship on graffiti art, Gajin Fujita, and the emergence of the term global contemporary as a way to frame my own approach to *Hood Rats*.

### **History and Historiography**

Legendary Los Angeles self-proclaimed Cholo graffiti writer, Chaz Boroquez argues: "Real graffiti is in the streets, always has been, always will be."<sup>16</sup> Rooted in its genre, arguments of authorship and transience are at the forefront of what elements create identity in graffiti work. Once based within a study of youth culture, graffiti is cited as beginning with adolescent peoples throughout history. From Viking soldiers tagging the under-side of Hagia Sophia's balcony railing to WWII's iconic "Kilroy was here" tag composed by a collective group of American soldiers, young men constitute the main creators of these tags.<sup>17</sup> Further, the majority of the New York City train bombing graffiti that began in the late 1960s and emerged as the impetus of the global graffiti scene that exists today was saturated with an adolescent male demographic. The initial surge of

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<sup>16</sup> "Chazz Part 1-5," YouTube, video file, posted by Ben Vargas, October 6, 2012, accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JO67FYWGuJA>).

<sup>17</sup> Adolescent girls and women are notoriously under-represented and understudied in the graffiti genre. Since graffiti's 1970's boom, on both the east and west coast, examples of female writers are rare and serve as tokens rather than composing a significant part of the recorded history. An iconic example of a female writer is Lady Pink, who started in the NYC train scene during the 1970s and continuing on into mainstream work with her very successful line of t-shirts and other clothing apparel, stickers, designs, etc.

graffiti in the United States simultaneously started both on the East Coast as well as the West Coast, yet with very different styles and little influence on one another in their inception. The characteristic Old English/Gothic script from the post zoot-suit era in the Cholo graffiti writing crews was baptizing the walls in Los Angeles during the 1960s – 1970s.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the metropolitan trains in New York City became a moving canvas that would spawn the graffiti art movement during the 1970s – 1980s and serve as a conduit for the merging of graffiti with pop culture. With each coast developing its own technical style, graffiti in the United States began its most prolific history.<sup>19</sup>

After experiencing extreme infamy in public places, such as trains, phone booths, and the sides of buildings in NYC during the 1970s – 1980s, graffiti began to fuse with pop-culture enough to become a permanent part of the mainstream art circuits. Jeffrey Deitch's historical account of graffiti in the United States surmises that graffiti entered the art world's galleries after musician Blondie's MTV music video "Rapture."<sup>20</sup> The short music video was the first American pop song to feature rapping on TV. In addition to featuring a rap segment, the video included cameos from East Coast graffiti writers Quinones and Fab Five Freddy. Deitch argues that the glimpses of the artists spray painting in the music videos background was one of the first signs that graffiti had become part of mainstream pop culture. However, after a strong youth music culture attachment between graffiti, rap/hip-hop, punk rock, and music videos that took place in the 1980s – 1990s, graffiti made its way back under the social umbrella of what was

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Deitch, Roger Gastman, and Aaron Rose, comps., *Art in the Streets* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli, 2011), 146-208.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory J. Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2-45.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Deitch, Roger Gastman, and Aaron Rose, comps. *Art in the Streets* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli, 2011), 10-15.



considered more tawdry than avant-garde in both the art and music worlds. With a few exceptions of collected works from artists that incorporated graffiti techniques in their repertoire such as Jean Michel Basquiat, graffiti writers and techniques developed within the genre were once again relegated to the streets until the turn of the century.<sup>21</sup>

Several historians have recounted graffiti's North American history from various vantage points. These chronicles largely agree on graffiti's cradle phase during the 1970s and 1980s in New York City and Los Angeles as well as on theoretical lenses applied to graffiti during this time period. However, there is an overt scarcity of lenses that analyze graffiti in the light of Internet-based image sharing that has occurred since the 1990s. While art historians like Aaron Rose have argued that graffiti became intertwined with skateboarding and other burgeoning sports and music around the 1970s, this account only speaks of the history and analysis of American graffiti prior to the Internet boom.<sup>22</sup> With the emergence and massive expansion of the Internet in the 1990s, graffiti writers began on websites and social networking profiles to share digital copies of their work. The mass image sharing, enabled by the world's acceptance of the Internet, not only inspired a birth of graffiti in countries that had little knowledge of its genre, but also axiomatically changed the influences acting upon American graffiti writers. In addition to sharing through technology, graffiti artists that started their artistic career writing in the streets began to enter professions such as graphic design, marketing, and industrial design, introducing visual spill over between graffiti characteristics and these fields.<sup>23</sup> Art critics

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<sup>21</sup> Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publisher, 2010), 1-40.

<sup>22</sup> *Beautiful Losers*, directed by Aaron Rose and Joshua Leonard, Arthouse Films, 2008. And Aaron Rose et al., *Beautiful Losers*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: D.A.P./Iconoclast, 2005.)

<sup>23</sup> Examples of graffiti artists that developed an apparel, poster, or other businesses based out of their art are: Lady Pink, who started her t-shirt and apparel empire in the early 1980s, Obey (Shepard Fairey), whose iconic Andre the Giant stickers quickly catapulted his business and brand into a lucrative and

and historians like Jeffrey Deitch and Sean Corcoran have curated and chronicled the change graffiti and street art have undergone since its reaches extended to a global playground, both citing the various kinds of graffiti that began to surface.<sup>24</sup> However, neither Deitch nor Corcoran have employed new theories in order to analyze the new forms. Likewise, Gregory Snyder has explored occupational and social arenas into which graffiti has seeped as the young writers of the 1970s and 80s grew up and went mainstream; however, Snyder neglects to fully distinguish the new forms of graffiti now created by these adult writers.<sup>25</sup> While these historians have explored the advent of graffiti as well as their links to the social and financial world, little attention has been given to overarching lenses that attempt to encompass the new global contemporary form of graffiti. Carlo McCormick argues that previous lenses applied to understanding graffiti and street art are insufficient with the global spread it has undergone in the past two decades. McCormick further argues that with the additional cultural influences now at play, some of the fundamental motives and aesthetics of graffiti have transformed, requiring new lenses of analysis when comprehending the work.<sup>26</sup>

In short, with the emergence of technology such as the Internet, digital photography, and social networking webpages, graffiti's underground and nonsanctioned work has experienced a metamorphosis best described as joining the "global

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notorious global image, and Chaz Bojorquez, who designed a sneaker in partnership with Chuck Taylor in 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Deitch, Roger Gastman, and Aaron Rose, comps., *Art in the Streets* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli, 2011), 10-15. And Sean Corcoran and Carlo McCormick, eds., *City as Canvas: New York City Graffiti from the Martin Wong Collection* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli, 2013), 10-20.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory J. Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 147-241.

<sup>26</sup> Deitch, Gastman, and Rose, *Art in the Streets*, 19-25.

contemporary.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the morphing of American identity can be seen as a product, in part, of the emergence of the global contemporary in the visual arts. The atmosphere of the visual arts changed with the end of the Cold War. Contemporary art was no longer defined, exhibited, interpreted, and acquired according to the social fashions and industry in New York, London, Paris, or Berlin. With the assistance of technology, art worlds blended into each other without permission or backing of mainstream institutions.<sup>28</sup> With the emergence of new art scenes (primarily in Asia and the Middle East) and the increase of biennials, the visual arts have become globalized.<sup>29</sup> With cross-referencing elements frequently appearing in the new global art environment, fresh lenses are required when analyzing contemporary art.

While many of the previous reviews and biographic writings based on Fujita and his work explore key artistic relationships found within his work, such as his use of ukiyo-e stylized figures in conjunction with graffiti, no work to date has explored the discourse on the collapsing of geographical and temporal distance and its impact on identity and his use of combined visual mediums.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Mr. Fujita stated that he was encouraged by a graduate school mentor to create whatever he could imagine would most “violate expectations of the viewers.”<sup>31</sup> I argue that, in an ironic turn of events, what is most provocative (and violating) for Fujita’s viewer is not necessarily the combination of artistic genres and mediums but rather the statement his work makes in regards to

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<sup>27</sup> Terry Smith and Saloni Mathur, "Contemporary Art: World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalization," *Contemporaneity* 1, no. 3 (2014): 163-73.

<sup>28</sup> Previously held institutions are here referring to academic, gallery, or museum-based institutions and organizations that held the reigns on determining what was deemed good or high art for the larger part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in North America and Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Smith and Mathur, "Contemporary Art: World Currents," 163-73.

<sup>30</sup> For Gajin Fujita’s biography as recorded by the LA Louver, see Peter Goulds, *Gajin Fujita: Made in L.A.*, comp. Scott Greiger (Venice, CA: LA Louver Gallery, 2011.)

<sup>31</sup> The interview was conducted over a series of correspondences from 09/2013 – 08/2014. Transcripts are featured in the Appendix.

American identity. The disjointed elements in *Hood Rats* form a clear and unique locus of contemporary identity. By analyzing *Hood Rats* along two spectrums: that of transience and permanence on the one hand, and that of authorship and anonymity on the other, the complexity of American individual identity is eloquently revealed.

### Transience and Permanence

The representation of a screen in Fujita's work communicates concepts of transience and permanence to the viewer. Through Japan's history, folding screens served many purposes, such as being used for tea ceremonies, backgrounds for concerts or dances, enclosures for Buddhist rites, and in outdoor processions.<sup>32</sup> The type of folding varied according to its function. For instance, small two-fold screens were used for tea ceremonies, while large, gold-leaf screens with up to eight panels served as backdrops for dancing.<sup>33</sup> In particular, *Hood Rats* arguably references and follows the tradition of cross-cultural representation in Japanese *Nanban* art. "Nanban art" (南蛮美術) refers to the Japanese art of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries influenced by contact with the *Nanban* (南蛮 or 'southern barbarians'), who were traders and missionaries from Europe.<sup>34</sup> *Nanban* art developed after the first Portuguese ships arrived in Kyushu in 1543.<sup>35</sup> In addition to Christian icons and other objects, *Nanban* byōbu (南蛮屏風) or folding screens are

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<sup>32</sup> Janet Woodbury Adams, *Decorative Folding Screens: 400 Years in the Western World* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1982),

<sup>33</sup> An emphasis on mobility required a structure that was lightweight and flexible. A lightweight but strong core was produced with a lattice of a stable wood covered with many layers of paper applied in a specific sequence, a technique referred to as karibari. Coincidentally, this technique can be seen in other works by Fujita such as *Roof Top* (2010) in which the lattice design can be interpreted as representing both a rooftop and a karibari design.

<sup>34</sup> Nanban art has been referred to as "Namban" art in Western art historical documents and literature. Both spellings relate to the same translation and genre of art.

<sup>35</sup> Yoshitomo Okamoto, *The Namban Art of Japan* (Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 1972), 4-44.

particularly notable for their formal collage of materials and techniques from both cultures.

For example, artists of the Kanō school, accompanied by artists of the Tosa school, combined foreign subject matter with Japanese styles of painting.<sup>36</sup> Techniques largely used in Western art such as linear perspective and use of alternative materials and techniques were fused with Japanese pictorial narratives depicting social climates of the time.<sup>37</sup> The viewer is able to ascertain the perhaps unconscious similarities between Fujita's work and that of a traditional Nanban byōbu when considering the intermingling of gold leaf and paint in both works. Comparing Kano Sanraku's Nanban byōbu screen with *Hood Rats* (Figure 2), the visual similarities form a tangible bridge between the two works. Interestingly, while the Kano Sanraku screen narrates the story of white Europeans entering Japanese lands, *Hood Rats* can be interpreted as Asian characters entering North American land. Or conversely, the work can be seen as commenting on Western influence within Japanese culture. Regardless of which interpretation, the melding and influence of two cultures on each other is present.

I argue that the Kanō Sanraku Nanban byōbu screen depicts people in a transient, migratory scene. This backdrop mirrors the short-lived existence most graffiti art suffers

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<sup>36</sup> The Kanō painting school/style evolved from Zen monk-painters during the medieval era, originally interlacing Chinese and native Japanese practices. The Kanō family served as the impetus for specific techniques, which eventually became considered a lens, and then a school of painting. The Kanō school/style was responsible for the dominant style of painting from the late 15th century until the Meiji period (1868.) By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kanō school had divided into many different branches. The Kanō family itself produced a string of major artists over several generations. In addition to the artists attributed to the Kanō family, there are a large number of unrelated artists who trained in workshops of the school. Some artists married into the family and changed their names, and others were adopted. According to Japanese art historian Robert Treat Paine, "another family which in direct bloodline produced so many men of genius... would be hard to find." (Robert Treat Paine and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of Japan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.)

<sup>37</sup> These Western techniques maintained a relatively short existence in Japanese art. The Tokugawa policy of sakoku reinforced the persecution and barring of Christianity from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and effectively closed Japan to foreign contact from the 1630s thusly leading to the decline of Nanban art.

due to its nonsanctioned nature. When comparing the two screens, the viewer is able to reflect upon the varying tones of transience within both works; from the physical labor and travel of immigrants to the life-span of nonsanctioned art. However, notions of transience are simultaneously juxtaposed with the permanence of culture and what elements aid in defining both. *Hood Rats* is, after all, a sanctioned work composed safely and protected by the the LA Louver gallery.<sup>38</sup> The Kano Sanraku Nanban byōbu screen preserves the image of transient European traders who were memorialized in the same way that Fujita's graffiti tags make the leap from transient to permanent. Mirroring the Kano Sanraku Nanban byōbu screen, accented with opulent gold leaf, *Hood Rats* proffers a potential lineage between it and the 17<sup>th</sup>-century screens such as the Nanban byōbu screen.

Furthermore, the depiction of a screen can carry not only tones of culture, but can also convey psychological platforms. Fujita's screen encompasses the viewer, holding up the realities he fuses and represents within his quarantined section of cultural identity. *Hood Rats* is able to create a new reality with the fusion of diverse cultures, iconography, and form; developing a unique identity therein.<sup>39</sup> The byōbu screen can be argued to maintain a sense of permanent value as its architectural structure creates a new psychological reality on which Fujita's work capitalizes to communicate his realms of identity. At the same time, the screen maintains transient qualities in its physical construction as the screen was designed to be lightweight and moved easily.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> After residing in the LA Louver gallery, *Hood Rats* was sold to an anonymous private party for an undisclosed amount.

<sup>39</sup> Wu Hung enumerates the concept of a screen being used beyond its artistic and architectural functions in his book *The Double Screen*. Hung uses the Chinese screen as the basis to form arguments that 'the screen' needs to be viewed not only as a surface that holds a painting but also as a psychological border maker.

<sup>40</sup> Byōbu screens were constructed with a unique paper-hinge system that united lightweight wood latticed panes that were then covered with paper. The screen's construction is considered a remarkable architectural

In the backdrop in *Hood Rats*, the byōbu screen can also be viewed as a platform on which a host of cultural identity markers are nestled. As established previously, traditional Japanese screens were used to redefine a space offering the viewer a separate physical and psychological environment. Here, the work can be read as serving as a kind of philosophical conduit hosting multiple cultures and altering the viewer's perception as to which environment both graffiti as well as traditional Japanese woodblock prints could be found. The screen thus becomes a kind of abstract psychological wall that one could argue exists in Fujita's divergent cultural background. With its formal similarities to traditional byōbu screens, *Hood Rats* metaphorically "screens" in a new reality, one in which juxtapositions are the norm. Within this mind's eye view of Fujita's hybrid culture, one can begin to compare perceptions of the screen's scene, and the symbols that adorn it.

The relationship between transience and permanence is also seen in most cases of unsanctioned American graffiti. Both historically and in the present day, the work will be painted over in a matter of days or weeks. It was this fact that formed much of the genre's medium choice and subsequent artistic product: spray paint and paint markers can be quickly distributed onto the desired surface. However, because the paint is distributed rapidly and detail is difficult to obtain, this problem is remedied by making the art at a larger scale in order to produce clear images. Furthermore, graffiti artists notoriously favor a larger size wall/work plane for their art due to the nature of elimination and/or

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feat for its time. For an in-depth description of the byōbu screen's composition, history, and use, see: Michael R. Cunningham, "Byōbu: The Art of the Japanese Screen," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 71, no. 7 (September 1984): 223-32.

appropriation the work will inevitably suffer.<sup>41</sup> The smaller a graffiti piece is, the easier another “writer”<sup>42</sup> can “buff it out”<sup>43</sup> or appropriate some of the work into their own.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps indicating his personal history with street writing, Fujita’s work rises over the viewer, as though the design was made for the side of a building or the face of a billboard –surfaces coveted by street writing crews. Within the work’s innuendo to street graffiti in terms of its scale, the viewer is attuned to the message that while the work resides in a Venice beach gallery, its roots harken to the streets and the lack of longevity therein. With its voluminous scale, the word “Hood Rats” addresses the viewer with a sense of self-acknowledged enforced transience that is associated with most graffiti, and the permanence of gallery art, regardless of the genre.

Another connective tissue between the ephemeral attributes of graffiti art and ukiyo-e woodblock prints is located in the Japanese term *mono no aware* (物の哀れ), a phrase that translates as one’s sensitivity to ephemera and awareness of the impermanence of things.<sup>45</sup> The ephemeral states of graffiti and ukiyo-e unite both forms of art under an umbrella of impermanence.<sup>46</sup> This aspect of transience is arguably a signature feature in the art developed by disenfranchised and marginalized populations

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<sup>41</sup> Carlo McCormick, Marc Schiller, and Sara Schiller, *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*, ed. Ethel Seno (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2010), 50-52.

<sup>42</sup> Graffiti artists refer to themselves and other artists “writers.” For more explanation and variations on this term see: Urban Dictionary, last modified 2013, [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com).

<sup>43</sup> “Buffing it out” is a term used to describe erasing or going over another writer’s work with one’s own. This process usually requires a foundational layer of white, black, or other solid base color to both eliminate the previous tag, bomb, etc. and to contrast the new work.

<sup>44</sup> Art Crimes: The Writing on the Wall.

<sup>45</sup> *Mono no aware* (物の哀れ), literally “the pathos of things”, also interpreted as “an empathy toward things”, or “a sensitivity to ephemera,” is a Japanese term for the awareness of life’s impermanence (無常 *mujō*), or transience of things, and a gentle sadness (or wistfulness) at their passing. The phrase and concept was used frequently in Japanese art. For an overview of the phrase and its origins, see: Frederic, “Mono no aware,” in *Japan Encyclopedia*, 657.

<sup>46</sup> Although *mono no aware* is understood in Japanese aesthetics as a distinctly aristocratic sensibility, the Buddhist notion of impermanence offered comfort to poor populations who could look to their current existence as transient and look forward to a better rebirth.



who frequently lack the funds and social power to create art that is archived. Similar to graffiti's generally mass-public audience, ukiyo-e prints, while maintaining a diverse history and eventually reaching heightened financial worth, were originally designed to have popular appeal. As such, ukiyo-e art had a kind of transient existence standing in opposition to "high-art-collecting" found in other areas of Japanese art from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The transient nature of ukiyo-e links it to the ephemeral existence of graffiti.

Interestingly, the concept behind the name "ukiyo" has changed throughout Japanese history. Ukiyo (浮世) originally embodied the ancient Buddhist philosophy in which the transience of material existence was conveyed in images of a floating world called "ukiyo-e" (浮世絵), during the philosophy's genesis from 794 - 1185. In this definition, ukiyo is perceived with a beautiful sadness attributed to the transient truths in the philosophy. However, in later Japanese history, beginning with the Tokugawa period, ukiyo refers to a celebration in one's ability to indulge in transient pleasure-based physical activities.<sup>47</sup> Connecting both definitions of ukiyo is a sense of transience. When the embedded understanding of the ukiyo philosophy is applied to that of contemporary graffiti, the viewer is able to make the connection between Japanese culture and graffiti art.

By connecting graffiti art and ukiyo-e woodblock prints, the lavish use of gold leaf in *Hood Rats* not only compares these two genres through their ephemeral existence, but also sheds light on the frequent juxtaposition of ephemera and poverty with

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<sup>47</sup> Examples of this definition of ukiyo can be seen in the pleasure quarters during the Tokugawa period. For a more in-depth view of the Tokugawa pleasure quarters, see: William B. Hauser, *Asia in Western and World History*, ed. Ainslie Embree and Carol Gluck Armonk (Armonk, NY: M E Sharpe, 1997.)

permanence and wealth.<sup>48</sup> Not unlike the gold leaf adorning the Kano Sanraku Nanban byōbu screen, Fujita has blanketed his backdrop with the same material. The glaring use of an expensive medium in the lap of two art forms, graffiti and ukiyo-e, which have historically maintained little value, is a part of the visual mantra in *Hood Rats*. With the coexistence of poverty and wealth and ephemera and permanence therein, *Hood Rats* creates an identity where both opposing terms exist.

In addition to providing a contrast of monetary value between mediums, gold leaf requires a great deal of technique in order to work with it fluidly. Accompanying the difficulty of incorporating gold leaf, Fujita's stencils (created in order to echo the wood block print style in his female combatants) require a great deal of time and focus. Designing and cutting his intricate stencils is not unlike the labor required of the ukiyo-e artist cutting the woodblocks for printing. Stencils are prominently favored among graffiti and street artists as they can be designed in private with the advantage of time and then used to create work in the streets quickly but to a powerful and large-scale affect.<sup>49</sup> Fujita's stencils can be seen as the descendants of ukiyo-e woodblock work, placed in a sea of contemporary signs and symbols, the composition of which create a multifaceted vision of identity.

Lastly, transience and permanence are reflected in the double reference to the historical ephemerality of ukiyo-e prints and the contemporary ephemerality of colloquialisms such as "hood rats." One of the influencing muses used by ukiyo-e

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<sup>48</sup> One could further argue that the performative nature of kabuki, on which ukiyo-e was developed, serves as another layer of art that maintains an ephemeral aspect.

<sup>49</sup> Banksy and Shepard Fairey "OBEY" are two of the most famous contemporary graffiti and street artists whom deal with stencils. In his book: *You Are An Acceptable Level of Threat*, Banksy chronicles and comments on some of his work over the past two decades. Shepard Fairey, now an incorporated business owner, has written and spoken extensively on his use of stencils.

woodblock print artists in designing prints were scenes from theatrical *kabuki* productions and actors therein. Traditional ukiyo-e prints are frequently synonymous with scenes from *kabuki* theatre; this frozen theatrical scene is also imitated in *Hood Rats*.<sup>50</sup> With staunch gesticulations, represented keenly in Fujita's stenciled figures, a sense of dramatized emotion and fleeting production is conveyed to the viewer, insisting on sentiments of ephemera within the work's interpretation.

Likewise, infused with tension and conflict, the work's main text "HOOD RATS" evokes the social stigmas and misogyny surrounding the cultural context of East Los Angeles. In fact, the term "Hood Rats" is one used in urban culture to impugn the moral character of young females. Women subjects who spend time around the (usually male-centric) street subculture of graffiti are frequently called "hood rats," an expression that implies sexual promiscuity and sycophancy in an oppressive effort to demonize their sexuality and disempower them.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, the placement of the female figures on either side of the script, "Hood Rats," becomes a commentary on the two women fighting. This visual juxtaposition forces the viewer to consider the potential commonalities between women referred to as "hood rats" in contemporary graffiti-laden ghettos and the depictions of Edo period courtesans and kabuki actors in woodblock prints. Moreover, the ephemerality of colloquialisms such as urban slang becomes a point for contemplation. While verbal slang and slander are filled with zeitgeist that is fleeting, Fujita's work starkly points to the persistent (if not permanent) slanderous attitudes of

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<sup>50</sup> Through mirroring notorious productions that have a transient lifespan lasting only as long as the curtain call and actors' concluding poses, ukiyo-e sustains a similar tone due to its visual sponsorship located in the theatre.

<sup>51</sup> For a visual reference into the term 'Hood Rat', see: *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*, directed by Jillian Mayer and Lucas Leyva, Borscht, 2012. For a general definition, see: Dictionary.com, last modified 2014, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hood+rat>.

groups that employ terms to derogate other members of society. The term “hood rats” is, therefore, transient, while the sentiment behind the slander seems to share common ground between all of Fujita’s cultures: Japanese art forms, Hispanic graffiti terms in the barrio of East LA, and American ghetto culture. In inquiries regarding the term “hood rat”, Fujita stated that it was a term used a great deal in his neighborhood growing up.<sup>52</sup> This remark lends credibility to the idea that the term was very deliberately used in combination with the kabuki-like female figures.

### **Authorship and Anonymity**

While the section above has explored the relationship between transience and permanence in *Hood Rats* through a variety of lenses, this section addresses the tension between authorship and anonymity in Fujita’s work. A graffiti artist’s self-assigned tag is traditionally a word or phrase under which an artist identifies oneself and their art.<sup>53</sup> As a writer’s personal tag is a baptismal symbol that both indoctrinates as well as identifies the artist to her/his community, the form of one’s tag frequently grows and changes over time. While many personal tags mutate and serve as the impetus for larger scaled “pieces” that are often obscured in “wild style” lettering, most writers maintain a strong attachment to their original tag name and form.<sup>54</sup> Due to its incomprehensibility to

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<sup>52</sup> Personal communication with the artist via email exchange, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Gregory J. Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1-65.

<sup>54</sup> Both “pieces” and “wild style” are colloquial graffiti terms. “Pieces” refer to graffiti work that requires more artistic talent, and time, in addition to a larger scale, and garner more attention and respect among the graffiti community. While the term “Wild Style” was first used in the 1970s to describe a plethora of terms in the graffiti art movement, the term now is generally used to describe a form of graffiti lettering in which the letter’s borders are obscured to the point of making it difficult for a viewer to decipher where a letter begins and ends. For an elaborated index of these terms, see: Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's*, 4-22.

viewers outside of the community, a writer's tag therefore simultaneously maintains authorship and anonymity.

Graffiti tags and designs serve a key role in the discourse surrounding *Hood Rats*. In addition to voicing Fujita's diversified socio-cultural pedigree, the graffiti art in *Hood Rats* serves as a road map to graffiti writing crew, social affiliation, and geography. Lyrically composed in a cursive script in the bottom left quadrant, a tag written in a gray-white thinly lined marker spells out "Boyle Heights." Boyle Heights is located in East Los Angeles and is the home-base neighborhood of Fujita's graffiti writing crew "Kill to Succeed."<sup>55</sup> A tag for the writing crew is written in a black paint marker to the right of the letter "d" in the word "hood:" both "KIIS" and "K2S" are acronyms for the crew. Perhaps one of the most paramount markers of identity and authorship in *Hood Rats* is the representations of cultural groups reflecting the graffiti gang family and Fujita's Japanese-American family. Graffiti writing crews can be seen as gaining their internal familial-like structure from street gangs. Following suit, esteem for its members and recognition for the family is paramount in the crew's identity and subsequently all of the identities of the crewmembers.

Another important marker of identity and authorship in *Hood Rats* is the representations of cultural groups represented by the two genres and cultures. To the right of the KIIS tag, in the upper right corner of the work, one finds the only tag in red. Though abbreviated by the edge of the canvas, the spray-painted symbol for the LA Dodgers is the most distinguishable tag in *Hood Rats*, and appears to reign over all of the other tags both in size and hue. The LA Dodgers baseball team logo is appropriated by

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<sup>55</sup> Boyle Heights is a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, which contributes to cultural aspects discussed when the analysis imparts ramifications of Fujita's work based on cultural identity.

LA gangs and reassigned the gang's signifying symbols, colors, and designs.<sup>56</sup> With its dripping blood red colors and composition, the symbol further alludes to signs of severity and drama encasing concepts of the writing crews' loyalty and devoutness in a life-long commitment with the seal of bloodshed.

Adding to this sense of authorship and anonymity, the appropriation of the "LA" Dodgers symbol is seen in the horizontal blue lines running throughout various planes of the work's backdrop. The hue of the blue is referred to as "Dodgers blue" and favored among writers that use the Dodgers' trademarks to signify their identity.<sup>57</sup> These blue accents, while not overpowering to the viewer at first glance, can be interpreted as serving as a symbolic geographic signature that unites both continents that *Hood Rats* culturally depicts. Because Fujita's work frequently incorporates the ocean, as in *Pacific Front* (Figure 3), a more subtle reading of these inconspicuous lines of blue can be seen as ocean waves set among a sea of graffiti tags that bridge Fujita's hybrid identity across the Pacific Ocean from East L.A. to Japan. Here the Pacific Ocean serves as a geographic bridge, which is visually woven seamlessly through the work's background, rooting a cultural heritage as permanent as the ocean depicted but as diverse as the lands on either side. With the symbol of a permanent structure such as the Pacific Ocean, Fujita cements the work's graffiti tags, and signature therein. Being buffed out by other writers or building owners, graffiti tags carry an almost certain impermanent tone with their

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<sup>56</sup> While the logo for the LA Dodgers is used to signify various gangs in Los Angeles, many street gangs and graffiti writing crews now use the team's symbol to illustrate city pride rather than specific gang affiliation.

<sup>57</sup> Graffiti artists based out of the USA refer to themselves as graffiti writers, or "writers" for short, while many academic and art communities refer to these works and people as graffiti art and graffiti artists; the terms "writer" and "graffiti artist" will be used to reference the same individuals in this paper.

presence – even while on Fujita’s gallery piece, the viewer is filled with a sense that the markings will disappear with enough time, lending to an eventual anonymity.

Bringing in his writing crew to tag the background, Fujita attempts to recreate the ambiance of graffiti from the streets.<sup>58</sup> This accent is a necessary point for the full representation of Fujita’s identity, adding a third layer based in the Latino/Chicano West Coast graffiti crew culture to his repertoire. These traditional graffiti markings punctuate the Japanese screened backdrop and create a visual storyline. Indeed the chaotic graffiti markings, when combined with the delicate construction of the Japanese screen, create interpersonal dialogues about multicultural art genres and the people they encompass. Regardless of a viewer’s historical knowledge of either culture represented (Edo Japan and contemporary East Los Angeles), markings of a group based on tribe-like structures are fluidly communicated as part of the work’s narrative toward identity. Authorship in *Hood Rats* is therefore fixed to membership within Fujita’s various groups and culture.

By embedding what can be argued to be art history’s form of “the other” – graffiti – with a cultural art form that can be seen as representing stereotypes of the “yellow peril,” Fujita visually creates a dialogue regarding marginal populations and their influence on what is thought of as the majority populations. Aligning with this concept, Gary Okihiro’s book *Margins and Mainstreams* argues that mainstream culture has been largely defined not by what is depicted through their culture but rather in opposition to what is depicted through marginal cultures: “...the mainstream derives its identity, its integrity, from its representation of the Other.”<sup>59</sup> This offers a definition of culture in which mainstream culture is shackled to its marginal and minority populations, in terms

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<sup>58</sup> For Fujita’s own clarification to this point, read the full interview transcription in the Appendix.

<sup>59</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994), 175.

of its self-representation and identity. Fujita's work delves further into a cultural dialog with his inclusion not only of graffiti writing crews but also the writing crew's visual connections with the East LA's gang culture. While Japanese heritage and writing crew membership are readily presented as markers of identity, *Hood Rats* argues that definitions for an individual identity are as malleable as the definitions of culture itself.<sup>60</sup> Further, by employing Okiihiro's theory, graffiti can be viewed as "the other" in art history. Implications would then follow suit that graffiti art has had a larger impact on mainstream art worlds than is typically considered by graffiti art historians to date such as Deitch, Rose, and Snyder. This could represent repercussions of graffiti authorship in other areas of art, that while attempting to oppose the constructs of graffiti art, have in fact incorporated them into their genres.

*Hood Rats* can further be read as offering its viewer a sense of authorship through two forms of legends. Ancient samurai duels maintain a similar folklore and legend that the graffiti writing crews in LA have developed within their communities. When comparing *Hood Rats* to the famous ukiyo-e work of Utagawa Yoshitora, *At Ganryûjima in Kyûshû, Miyamoto Musashi Fights Sasaki Ganryû (Kyûshû Ganryûjima ni oite Miyamoto Musashi Sasaki Ganryû shiai zu)* (Figure 4), the viewer is able to ascertain Fujita's direct reference to samurai duels (whether real or theatrical) with the traditional poses of the combatants. Yoshitora's work exhibits the legendary building scenes that were paramount with the mystique of the samurai warrior while Fujita's woodblock-like

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<sup>60</sup> Identity, as it relates to authorship, is illustrated in four distinct forms: Fujita's writing crews' identity KIIS and KGB, the Japanese ancestral markers of ukiyo-e, and the red cartouche located in the upper left corner and a black lined publisher's seal mark in the lower right corner, which have been previously enumerated to serve as both a hiragana signature and city identifier.



lettering (of the BLOCKBUSTER stylized graffiti script previously discussed) offers a similar sense of legend, this time dealing with the legend and history of graffiti writing.

Indeed, with a familial structure based on loyalty, respect, and camaraderie, writing crews provide a sense of drama not unlike the iconic stories of the Japanese samurai. Reputation serves at the forefront for both communities. The canonical reputation in both the samurai community as well as graffiti writing crews is built on bravery, skill, and proliferation. Both of these legendary groups maintain a strong folkloric authorship that aids in establishing a global contemporary identity. In an effort to represent Fujita's cultural identity, *Hood Rats* at once transcends traditional definitions of both authorship and anonymity by incorporating symbols for both.

Interestingly, by considering legend in the form of the samurai, one is able to return full circle to the concepts of permanence vs. transience. Postulating the archetype of a samurai, one is relayed a sense of permanence via the legendary and folkloric position that this figure has throughout history. Labeling his samurai as "Hood Rats," Fujita either raises up the transient archetype this slur is meant to signify, or questions the honorable status of the noble samurai class in Japanese history. Ultimately Fujita's viewer questions the commonalities and legend behind the various labels of: artist, hood rat, and samurai. The connections between the symbols and figures in Hood Rats ultimately links the transience and permanence spectrum with that of authorship and identity.

## **Conclusion**

Through my analysis, I have established that the histories of traditional Japanese art and graffiti, at the onset, could be considered oppositional and fixed. However, as I

have weaved in and out of the various representations in *Hood Rats*, the similarities between the contrasting elements began to reveal themselves more staunchly than their initial differences. This cross genre, cross-media, and cross-historical analysis has yielded unique observations regarding identity as it relates to a global contemporary art world.

The relationship between traditional Japanese art investigated here and graffiti together elicit further inquiries into other areas not brought into the conversation of this study. Topics such as the relationship between the female samurai figures and feminist theory as it relates to or contrasts with graffiti and ukiyo-e cultures are teeming with potential avenues. In turn, the same constructs of transience and permanence, and authorship and anonymity could be aptly applied and yield new information regarding identity. Further sublenses such as place and time could be analyzed using this thesis' dictum and stand to elaborate on the artistic global contemporary and its relationship to identity.

*Hood Rats* is a visual artistic and cultural composite that communicates an example of American identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By presenting seemingly very different art genres to the viewer, Fujita forces his audience to consider the connections not traditionally sought out between graffiti tags and ukiyo-e art. By applying the lenses of transience and permanence and authorship and anonymity to *Hood Rats*, I have interpreted Fujita's work to reveal several perspectives onto the construction of contemporary cultural identity. *Hood Rats* is a contemporary artwork in which global citizenship prevails in communicating its artistic narrative. Examining the work under lenses designed to provide consistency when looking at diverse artistic traditions, I am able to contrast and compare Fujita's work through new foci. Ideally, future lenses will

be applied to contemporary artwork developed with multidimensional terms, so that cultural representations are no longer distinctive boundaries but rather compositions of a new identity.



Figure 1: Gajin Fujita, *Hood Rats* (2012). Spray paint, paint markers, Mean Streak, and gold leaf on wood panels; each panel: 72 x 20 in, overall: 72 x 120 in.



Figure 2: Kano Sanraku. Nanban Byōbu Screen, Japan. Momoyama Period (early 17<sup>th</sup> century) Set of folding screens, color on gold-leaf paper, 182 x 371 cm. Suntory Museum of Art Tokyo Japan. (Important Cultural Property, Nanban Screens, Attributed to Kano Sanraku, Pair of six-fold screens, Momoyama period.)



Figure 3: *Pacific Front*, 2008. Gajin Fujita. Silver, yellow gold, spray paint, paint marker & Mean Streak on wood panels. Overall: 48 x 48 in (121.9 x 121.9 cm) (3 panels)





Figure 4: *At Ganryūjima in Kyūshū, Miyamoto Musashi Fights Sasaki Ganryū* (*Kyūshū Ganryūjima ni oite Miyamoto Musashi Sasaki Ganryū shiai zu*), 1843-47 (Tenpō 14–Kōka 4). Utagawa Yoshitora. Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper. Vertical ōban triptych. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

## APPENDIX

### AUTHOR'S WRITTEN INTERVIEW WITH GAJIN FUJITA

The following is a series of interviews Patricia Guiley conducted with Gajin Fujita in email format. All spelling/wording has been left in its original format. The Initials PG are for the author and GF are for the artist.

#### Writing Crews and Contribution

PG: You have a black tag to the right of the Words *Hood Rats* that reads "KIIS." I assume this is for your writing crew (Kill 2 Succeed) however there is another symbol/letter following the "s" can you tell me what it is or stands for? I realize that your writing crew collaboratively contributes to your work when composing the background and while that exact mark may not be done by you, I'm hoping you can decipher it for me?

GF: I believe that mark next to the K2S is a gestural swirl crossing the bottom of the letter Y from a tag that reads ENEMY above the K2S tag which was done with a mean streak or an oil stick by my friend Prime. Hope that this is the mark you are talking about!

PG: The red cartouche in the upper left corner reads: ESLOS.

I've speculated that this is an acronym that can be read in several directions:

1. As an acronym for **E**ast **S**ide **L**os [Angeles]
2. Translated as "is the" from the Spanish "Es Los"
3. And translated as "the sun" for the Spanish "Sol es."

--This reading would offer a narrative within the cartouche expressing: "East Side Los [Angles] is the sun."

All three readings, as well as the final statement, are speculations on my part, can you clarify the meaning or tell me if I am wrong?

GF: ESLOS is an acronym to East Side Los, which is a Block style text I grew up seeing in and on my parents walls growing up in the east side of Los Angeles, Boyle Heights.

PG: The script in which "Hood Rats" is written in, has a visual composition that is different from some of your other works' scripts. I refer to it as a kind of graphic design-inspired BLOCKBUSTER style, for lack of a better description. Why did you choose this style of script for *Hood Rats*?



GF: You are absolutely right when you describe the Hood Rats text as graphically stylized Blockbuster script. I'd actually collaborated in designing this script with my good graffiti friend Prime and chose to make it stand out so that it'll capture not only the attention but the projected imagination of the viewer to get a sense of the streets of LA, where there used to be a lot of block lettering being painted in many different neighborhoods. Also to evoke the idea of the term hood rats which is a slang that heavily gets used by young people in the neighborhoods.

Interview with Gajin Fujita: Round 2

### Techniques, Methods, Labor in Construction

PG: Creating Stencils and working with gold leaf in art are both viewed as difficult mediums that require a great deal of labor and detail, have you contemplated the processes (and difficulties therein) with the process of creating wood block prints that took place during the Edo period in ukiyo-e artworks?

GF: Yes I've come to contemplation after people have mention the comparison of the intricacy involved in the practices to me, but was really not thinking about these processes being similar in technical difficulty in the beginning. I think the stenciling aspect is what is closely similar to the old wood block prints just because in both processes we have to be conscious of color separation, but the wood block prints are much more complex and are on a different level of difficulty. An example of difficulty maybe, where the wood block carvers have to be cognitive of carving the image on the wood block in reverse and this whole process of carving out of wood blocks adds a sculptural aspect and I can't even wrap my mind around anything that is 3-D.

PG: What was the impetus for you to combine woodblock stencils with the graffiti?

GF: My whole thing of fusing the wood block print imagery with graffiti came from my art coach, Dave Hickey telling all us students that art has to violate expectations of the viewers, in one his lectures! And I thought about using and fusing the shunga (erotic) wood block imagery with graffiti in my first works.

PG: Does your subject matter changes extensively when you employ different mediums and materials? For instance, do you entertain different subjects when you incorporate gold leaf compared to works done solely with spray paint, Mean Streak, paint markers, etc?

GF: My subject matters evolve in minuscule increments but I always use pretty much the same mediums and materials cause these works are always covered with gold leaf, I may change up the color of the metal to platinum or silver but that really doesn't dictate me into changing my subject matter too much.

PG: Is there any paint medium you haven't used or don't like to use for your studio work that you would use in street work?

GF: When I use to do illegal street work I always use to wish I would have more time cause you had to be very quick with what you were working on and I also use to wish I could work with some brushes to get more intricate details in the paintings but it would not suffice and suit the activity cause it was really a matter of time and efficiency.

### Writing Crews and Contribution

PG: I am looking at the matter of “place” as it pertains to graffiti from the streets to the gallery (streets meaning any piece that is non-sanctioned and gallery meaning any institution that houses sanctioned work.) One of the changes I’ve found is that crews generally write in the street however when artists move their work into the gallery, it becomes a singular endeavor again. Your gallery work is unique as it maintains work and embellishment from your original writing crew but also contains the elements that come with being a sanctioned work that you can spend a great deal of time on.

PG: Why do you have your writing crew participate in your work?

GF: The involvement of my crew participating is my attempt reference and a partial resemblance of what I see out on the streets. The act of people sometimes layering over one another and the different styles that are distinguished by each artist. But it could never mirror the streets and be as authentic cause there is absolutely no control over what happens out on the streets and that is impossible to capture!

PG: Do you ever do work they don’t work on?

GF: It's mostly tagging for the background that my friends do for me so I don't really have to finish or work on anything that they haven't completed cause usually its all done. What I'll always do is, I'll go ahead and layer the wood block print imagery over their tags or do a more complex stylized text piece over their works.

PG: If so, does the subject or style change within these works compared to that done with your crew?

GF: There are times when I'll softly dictate to a good friend of mine and ask them to spell out a particular word that pertains to the final imagery or title of some pieces. As an example I recently had my friend Defer draw out a text in his block style lettering that spelled out Southland which sprawled across the entire length of 15ft. And used that as a background for my piece that was titled Southland Standoff. Also Defer was able to do his Southland block lettering before I had started painting the samurai characters that I had in mind of painting.

PG: Is there a game plan shared with the crew before working on one of the gallery pieces? (Do you explain what the main subjects will be?)

GF: Most of the time it's very spontaneous but there are some pieces that are done with a little bit of pre planning like what I did with Defer in the Southland Standoff painting.

PG: And if you do talk about this with them, does it change the kind of tags/writing they chose to put on that particular piece?

GF: The changes occur cause I will specifically ask them to tag up a specific word or even to tag in a particular style like block lettering or gang style writing as oppose to the bubbly hip hop style text which is synonymous with the New York writers.

PG: Do all of the members of the writing crew contribute to every piece or is it specific members from the crew on specific pieces?

GF: The crew usually will help out on the larger scale pieces and they are very spontaneous cause I'll ask them to tag the paintings when I have the panels all gilded with the metals and its usually when they are visiting my studio.

PG: Are all of the original members still in your writing crew (KIIS and/or KGB)?

GF: Yes the original members are still in the crews and this crew stuff is like a lifetime commitment or more like a life long fraternity.

#### Reference to Traditional Japanese Screen

PG: I've read the wooden panels on which "Hood Rats" is composed, as Japanese styled screens (Even if only symbolically). Do the panels represent either a fusuma or byōbu screen for you?

GF: Yes the idea behind the panels came from the byōbu, except my paintings don't fold up like a byōbu and aren't hinged like a byōbu. Also the paintings aren't intended to be used like a furniture like the byōbu's.

PG: Further, there appears to be a screen within the screen that showcases the text. However this can visually be read as a technique used to create a 3 dimensional field for the text as well. As though the text is set back on the scene, in a manner not unlike a stage. Did you intend to set the text within a frame, or to visually give it its own field?

GF: I did not intend to set the text to be dimensional. However I did use the perspective point with the screens receding into the background and had closed the 3rd set of fusuma to have a field to paint the HOOD RATS text.

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